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Results, Expectations, and Challenges for Cambodia's 2012 ASEAN Chairmanship

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Since its establishment in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been considered one of the most successful and dynamic Asian organizations shaping institutional architecture throughout the wider Asia-Pacific region. However, today ASEAN is grappling with how to handle perceived strategic competition between the United States and China. In addition, concerns over regional unity, solidarity, autonomy and centrality, along with developmental inequality, common identity, shared values and norms, and collective leadership and responsibilities continue to challenge member states.

Vannarith Chheang, Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, explains that “Cambodia needs to prepare well in advance for worst case scenarios and be ready and willing to address problems with diplomacy and leadership.”

The central focus for ASEAN, however, is how to successfully manage China's reemergence as a prominent regional actor. Different degrees of economic connectivity, historical engagement, geographical proximity, and geo-political cooperation between individual ASEAN members and China have generated different perceptions and approaches regarding accommodating or hedging against that country's rise. For instance, Cambodia is regarded as one of the oldest and closest friends of China and Chinese influence continues to shape Cambodia's foreign policy. The dispute over the South China Sea is a case in point. Cambodia, a non-claimant state, has cautiously taken a slightly different position to that of some other ASEAN members, while at the same time trying to maintain and strengthen close cooperation between ASEAN and China.

Cambodia accepted the role of ASEAN Chair with promises of moving forward to the goal of an ASEAN Community scheduled for 2015. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen emphasized earlier this year that Cambodia would fulfill its leadership role responsibly and would work to neutrally moderate and mediate all regional and international issues. He reaffirmed that Cambodia's international standing and prestige have been enhanced and strengthened as a result of its role within ASEAN. In addition, through ASEAN, Cambodia wants to further expand its diplomatic and strategic space to serve its own national interests. By successfully chairing ASEAN, Cambodia was hoping to get more support for its bid—which was unsuccessful—to be a rotating non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2013-2014.

Cambodia hosted the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in early April 2012 which reaffirmed the institution's political commitment to the goal of a 2015 ASEAN Community. The overarching goal of the community is to empower ASEAN to have a more proactive presence on the global stage. Under the theme “ASEAN: One Community, One Destiny,” Cambodia has attempted to realize a “people-centered ASEAN” with an emphasis on narrowing the development gap, linking economic integration with poverty reduction, and creating an environment for the security and safety of ASEAN citizens.

In his opening remarks at the April summit, Prime Minister Sen stressed that “ASEAN in 2012 highlights the joint determination and cooperation of the ASEAN people to work in



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chorus to build the ASEAN Community as a cohesive family, living in political security, economic and socio-cultural harmony, and which is rules-based, peaceful and economically strong.” However, the failure to issue a joint communiqué after the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting last July has overshadowed Cambodia’s chairmanship because of the inability to reach consensus on the issue of the South China Sea. This further reflected the underlying limited capacity of ASEAN when dealing with sensitive issues. However, as a result of strong Indonesian diplomacy and leadership, ASEAN subsequently did release a statement entitled “ASEAN’s Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea.”

At the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) held in May, ministers did agree to increase the frequency of the ADMM-Plus Meetings—from three years to two—in order to strengthen security dialogue and practical defense cooperation between ASEAN and its eight dialogue partners, which include the United States and China. In addition, Cambodia’s Ministry of National Defense encouraged other defense leaders to consider the creation of an ASEAN Master Plan of Security Connectivity to synergize existing regional security institutions such as the ADMM-Plus with the East Asia Summit (EAS), and introduced a concept paper on an ASEAN Civil War Free Zone.

This November, Cambodia will host another ASEAN Summit along with the EAS and other important meetings including the ASEAN-China Senior Officials’ Informal Consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. A series of preparatory meetings and consultations were held in Phnom Penh in mid-September to establish the agenda and prepare draft documents. It is expected that consensus will be reached on many issues of common concern under the three pillars of economic, political-security, and socio-cultural communities. However, it will take considerable work to further strengthen certain regional norms and institutions and clearly the ongoing tensions in the South and East China Seas will be an issue.

It is further expected that ASEAN leaders will reach consensus on separate human rights and human trafficking declarations, an institute for peace and reconciliation to be possibly headquartered in Jakarta, Indonesia, and a joint statement on the establishment of an ASEAN regional demining center to strengthen ASEAN capacity in clearing landmines. During the ASEAN+3 Summit with China, Japan and South Korea, the partnership on continuing connectivity will be emphasized as these three countries have provided significant economic assistance and investment to ASEAN states in infrastructural development, establishing regional production networks and people-to-people contacts. Unfortunately, the current tensions between China and Japan regarding the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are destabilizing for regional cooperation and could potentially derail efforts to create an East Asian Community based on ASEAN+3.

It is anticipated that leaders at the upcoming EAS will reach agreement on green growth, a regional comprehensive economic partnership and adopt a declaration on anti-malarial medicines. In addition to the existing five areas of cooperation under the purview of the EAS—finance, energy, education, avian flu prevention, and disaster management—ASEAN is trying to expand its connectivity with other individual EAS member states. It is also expected that the five nuclear weapon states will sign the Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, which was delayed in July due to technical and administrative problems.

For its part, Cambodia needs to redouble its efforts in coordinating and chairing the upcoming summits and meetings in order to demonstrate to the region and beyond that it is capable of acting as chair in a responsible and constructive manner as it claimed earlier this year. Furthermore, Cambodia needs to prepare well in advance for worst case scenarios and be ready and willing to address problems with diplomacy and leadership. As the world and the region becomes more complicated and unpredictable, Cambodia will be well advised to act cautiously in managing differences by taking into consideration the motivations and interests of individual member states. However, to accommodate and harmonize all these different interests is a huge challenge for the Cambodian chair.